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Double Debunking: Modern Divination and the End of Semiotics.

“An fortasse ordinem non diligit anima illis etiam numeris sensualibus attestantibus.”

Augustine, *De Musica*, 6, 14, 47

1. Introducing semiotics.

Semioticians dread being introduced to a new person, and being asked about their job. “I’m a semiotician”, they hastily answer, but they know that they will go through the usual, frustrating experience: reactions on the interlocutor’s face will span from puzzlement to actual fear, according to a nuanced typology that consummate party-goers semioticians are all too familiar with. Some people will briefly, nervously nod, then change subject, as if they had just been answered: “I’m an undertaker”. They don’t know what a semiotician is, but are afraid to ask, for several reasons: they don’t want to show their ignorance, they are scared to be given a lengthy reply on an abstruse occupation, but, most of all, they think that if they don’t know even the name of a job, then that job is essentially useless for society, and who has it is a loser; no reason to enquire.

Unfortunately, though, that is not the worst category of conversation partners a semiotician can have. There is much worse, like those who will bluntly ask, apologizing for their ignorance with a smirk on their face: “And what is a semiotician?”. There is something more excruciating than having a job that nobody knows about. It is having a job whose description requires at least a two-hour academic lesson. But if the semiotician tries the long way, if he or she embarks on a detailed explanation about the specificity of semiotics, the result will be disheartening: after a few minutes, interlocutors will repress a yawn, nervously looking for an escape, dying for someone to set them free from such torturous conversation. Sadly, semioticians are usually so attentive to details and so able to decipher them that these expressions of impatience and boredom won’t go unnoticed.

There is also a third category of party interlocutors, the worst of them all. These are people who vaguely know what semiotics is about, but as a matter of fact, despise it, and as a consequence despise semioticians, and are eager to find the most sarcastic way to convey their contempt. One of their usual lines will go: “ah, semiotics, that was famous in the 1970s, isn’t it?”, which means that semioticians are old-fashioned losers, people too stupid to realize

that the world of ideas moved forward, toward new enchantments, and are still sticking to old mantras, like people wearing their grandparents' clothes at a cool party.

This third category also admits a variant: people who will not deem semioticians as people stuck in time, but as people stuck in space. Their typical reply will be: "oh, semiotics, that is popular in Italy, isn't it?", which actually means "what you do is the academic equivalent of lasagna, you can try to make it sound global as much as you want, it will always smell of your mom's kitchen". That is the typical answer of most Anglo academics. By it, they will surmise not only that semiotics is a local academic dish, but also that it could never enter the menu of global, that is, Anglo, education. Philosophy, history, geography, even rhetoric are admissible, but semiotics is definitively Latino, or continental at the most.

Frustrated with this kind of social experience, many semioticians give up. They start to lie. Their answer will change according to who their interlocutors are, or according to whom they think their interlocutors are. They will range from something very general, like "I'm a philosopher", to something more specific but actually insincere, like "I'm a linguist"; "I'm a philosopher of language"; "I'm a scholar in communication studies". These replies, relieving on the one hand, will nevertheless sharpen the pain of semioticians, as they realize how easy their life would be if they *really* were linguists, or philosophers, or communication theorists. At every new lie, as semioticians see a bright expression of recognition appearing on their interlocutor's face, their feeling of identity will further disintegrate, leaving them with an excruciating question: "Who am I? Am I living a lie?".

The reason I decided to write this essay, however, is not offer counseling and consoling thoughts to lost semioticians. Conversely, here I want to take these party conversations seriously. I want to ponder over those puzzled looks, bored faces, contemptuous comments, useless explanations, self-diminishing lies, and analyze them. Most of all, I want to deal with the traditional object of semiotics, which gives the discipline its name: the sign. Why did semiotics develop as a discipline that concentrates on the concept of sign, and that sees and interprets the world through this concept? Why was the idea of a science that systematically studies signs welcome in a certain epoch of humanity, and why does it seem so abstruse to most nowadays? Should it be given up, like something that belongs to a remote, vanished past? Or is there something in semiotics that still offers answers that no other discipline can provide?

This essay, however, is not about marketing semiotics. It does not aim at making propaganda for the discipline and the usefulness of its academic and social existence. It is not excluded, indeed, that this inquiry will come up with a bitter, disheartening conclusion: that semiotics

really is something past, local, and locked in an ivory tower, doomed to the same destiny of medieval scholastic or early modern casuistry. But it is also possible that this exercise of self-analysis will end up with a different conclusion, showing unexplored potential for the concept of sign, the discipline of semiotics, and the work of semioticians.

Social recognition is not always evidence of theoretical or analytical status. Some scientific or medical disciplines bear names that are unknown to the general public but are nevertheless central. Most educated people won't precisely know what a nephrologist does, and a person introducing him-or herself as nephrologist at a party will be likely to elicit the same bewildered faces semioticians are confronted with. However, people who have serious kidney problems will soon learn what a nephrologist is about. But that is exactly the point. Although the name of the profession is mysterious, deriving from a Greek word like semiotics does, its object is clear. The nephrologist indeed might also introduce him-or herself, more clearly, as "kidney doctor"; but can semioticians introduce themselves as "sign doctors"? Unfortunately, signs are objects whose quality consistently differs from that of kidneys.

What kind of an object is, therefore, a sign, and why was an entire academic discipline shaped around it? Is the project still sustainable?

2. The anthropological genesis of semiotics.

As historians of semiotics have pointed out, the concept of sign is very oldⁱ. Both in the west and in the east, when people started to philosophize, they often came up with modes of thinking that were similar to the contemporary concept of sign, that which is at the core of modern semiotics (Eschbach and Trabant 1983). Various definitions of sign have been given, culminating in the classic articulations that Saussure and Peirce offered at the beginning of the twentieth century (Saussure 1972; Peirce 1931-5). The point here is not to reflect whether these definitions are still valid, retrieve some forgotten definitions from past history — or proto-history — of semiotics, or propose some new ones, but consider whether the kind of human experience that prompted the philosophical creation of the concept of sign, and make it central in certain contexts, is still relevant.

Two domains, in western antiquity, played a fundamental role in the emergence of the concept of sign: divination and medicine (Manetti 1996; King 1982). In both domains, professionals (haruspices in ancient Rome, doctors) sought to provide techniques in order to somehow control, or at least become acquainted with, the invisible forces that influence

humans. Haruspices were consulted so as to determine whether a certain activity was undertaken under the spell of bad or good omen (Beerden 2013; Raphals 2013; Rosenberger 2013). Doctors were consulted so as to establish whether malign forces were weakening or even destroying the body (Holmes 2010; Nutton 2013; Ferngren 2014). In both contexts, the mode of thinking that was later known as “sign”, was a response to incertitude and invisibility. Unseen, often malevolent forces were thought to condition human destiny. Knowing them and understanding their will directly was, nevertheless, impossible. These forces, it was believed, spoke to humanity not through clear words, but through voices that had to be recognized, studied, and interpreted.

In divination, professionals had first to identify the perceptual space in which these voices would emerge. The internal organs of animals or the sky would, therefore, play the same role; they would be turned into the limited field within which visible voices of invisible forces could manifest themselves and, if appropriately interpreted, speak (Ginzburg 1986; Christin 1995; Manetti 1998). They also shared another essential characteristic: they both included random, unexpected irregularities. The capricious conformation of organs or the equally irregular flying of birds across the sky were instrumental in turning the field of observation into a field of divination (Volli 1988; Leone 2014: 515-28; Wiley 2015). From the contemporary perspective, indeed, the effort of the haruspex consisted in turning what was apparently irregular and meaningless into a message (Lambert and Guilhem 2012).

In other words, divination was a translation, rendering the mysterious and chaotic voices of invisible forces into regular, and understandable, words. Like every translation, divination therefore needed a code, a system of matching able to attribute a specific meaning to each excrescence in an animal’s organ, to each sudden appearance of birds in the sky (Dusi and Neergard 2000; Marsciani 2007). Of course, such code could only be partially formalized by tradition, and vaguely transmitted from generation to generation of fortune-tellers. However, what matters is that the mode of thinking behind divination, associating invisible forces with chaotic perceptions, and translating these into understandable verbal messages, was fundamental in those societies. Being able to read the mercurial will of those forces was of primary importance for those who wanted to maintain control on their lives (Fabbrichesi 2006).

Ancient medicine also worked according to similar principles, although in this case the field to be observed in search of voices from a mysterious elsewhere had not to be created but coincided with the body. Nevertheless, the part of medicine that was later known as semeiotics — the ancestor of modern semiotics — also had to segment the body in order to

identify some specific fields of observation, for instance the skin with its irregular colors, textures, and shapes, or the equally capricious fluids produced by the human body (Viola 1928; Sahli 1928-32). These could be observed and translated into a diagnosis, that is, a verbal interpretation of the hidden forces moving in the body and manifesting themselves through mysterious appearances (Giustetto, Nejrotti, and Novara 1997).

Medicine came to be more codified than divination, and developed into both a practice and a science for it could rely on procedures of falsification. There was, of course, no causal relation between a certain flight of birds in the sky and the success of a military campaign: the mysterious forces that were thought to connect them disappeared with the advent of Christianity, replaced by other mysterious forces (Ferngren 2009). On the contrary, there was a physical, causal connection between the appearance of stains on the skin of a patient and a disease (Leone Forthcoming *Help*). Doctors who could correctly identify the connection, and prescribe the appropriate therapy, had their patients survive, while less fortunate patients, with less perspicacious doctors, would die. Therefore, human bodies, their survival and death, became the field in relation to which diagnoses could be tested and dramatically falsified or corroborated.

To resume, the mode of thinking that became foundational for modern semiotics developed mostly in the domain of ancient divination and medicine. They both consisted in traditions, strategies, methods, and techniques to probe, and to a certain extent control, the invisible forces conditioning human lives. Directly knowing what these forces wanted or were meant to was precluded to laymen, who had to resort to specialists in order to single out and interpret those voices. Therefore, the mode of thinking at work in both divination and ancient medicine implied: 1) an invisible agency; 2) acting according to mysterious plans; 3) affecting human lives, either as individuals or in community; 4) manifesting itself through perceptible but capricious elements of reality; 5) requiring the mediation of professionals (haruspices, doctors) in order to 6) single out those elements in a field; 7) identify patterns in their apparent irregularity; 8) associate these patterns with verbal interpretations; 9) pronounce a response on the probable course of actions these invisible forces would take, and 10) propose some remedies, such as sacrifices to the gods or medical treatments, in order to divert or influence this course if deemed negative.

A corollary of this development is that the mode of thinking that anticipated modern semiotics somehow already showed a bifurcation between causal and non-causal logics. On the one hand, divination could only arbitrarily associate the will of gods with the flying of birds in the sky, or with the shape of animals' internal organs. At that time it was believed that

a causal, and not an arbitrary association, connected the two dimensions, the visible and the invisible, the mysterious and the interpretive, the non-verbal and the verbal (Busine 2005; Johnston and Struck 2005; Flower 2008). Later on, though, lack of evidence and falsification revealed divinatory techniques for what they were: arbitrary, traditional modes of ascribing meaning to meaningless objects. On the other hand, medical knowledge of symptoms fully developed into science, in which arbitrary interpretations were discarded, traditions tested, falsification garnered through feed-back of the human body, and semeiotics established as a discipline that only deals with causal meaningfulness, with those elements of perception that modern Peircean semiotics would have called “indexes”.

The picture of the conceptual genesis of semiotics would be incomplete without considering that similar modes of thinking were explicitly at work also in other domains of life. Divination and medicine were both about the identification, and consequent interpretation, of spontaneous elements of reality. Haruspices could operate so that such elements would manifest themselves more clearly, for instance exposing the internal organs of an animal; in the same way, doctors could encourage the production of semeiotic evidence by forcing patients to conserve their body excretions for the purposes of medical examination. However, in both cases, it was the agency of mysterious forces to produce evidence of their future course of action in nature, either in the sky or in the human body. Nevertheless, ancient civilizations were also familiar with other processes, whose effect was that of creating human-made artifacts that would then exert their own agency (Gell 1998). That is what the ancient practice of the portrait was about.

Western myths about the ‘invention of painting’ relate that the first icon was created as future pictorial replacement of an absent lover.ⁱⁱ That too was a ‘mode of thinking’, or better, an ‘operational mode’ that would then become part of semiotics: given an object, a simulacrum is created that allows that object to be somehow present to the mind although it is not present to perception any longer. For a simulacrum to work, then, it must possess qualities that enable a sort of bifurcation in perception. The lover sees the portrait, appreciates its configuration of shapes and colors, but then this configuration triggers recognition, that is, mental reference to the absent object of desire. Indeed, the configuration is such that its internal proportions and relations reproduce, to a certain extent, the internal proportions and relations of the ‘real’ beloved (Marin 1983; Marin 1993).

3. The refinement of ancient semiotics.

In divination as well as in medicine, apparently capricious configurations of reality were 'read' as messages from mysterious forces (according to a symbolical logic in the first case, to an indexical, causal logic in the second). In the arts, humans replaced gods (or 'nature') in shaping the relation between a beloved but absent object and its present simulacrum. In the three cases, however, a semiotic competence was indispensable in order to bridge the mental gap between two dimensions: presence and absence, visibility and invisibility, perception and silence. Without this competence, humans would be left awestruck, terrified by the uncontrollable agencies shaping their future, affecting their bodies, separating them from their cherished objects. As professional skills were developed in the first two realms in order to help other humans to bridge this gap (haruspices, doctors), so in the third realm too, artists acquired special abilities for the evocation of absent objects through their simulacra. The doctor, the haruspex, and the painter were the first semiotic champions of humanity. They were, indeed, skillful manipulators of what Peircean semiotics would later call indexes, symbols, and icons.

Doctors would learn or develop increasingly sophisticated techniques so as to infer from apparently random oddities in the human body the specific force, that is, the disease, probably causing it. Their knowledge was transmitted from generation to generation of doctors, through apprenticeship but also through books; at the same time, it was open to falsification and innovation by experience as well as by experiment.

Haruspices could not falsify previous methods of divination because they were not falsifiable. Methods of connecting omens with predictions were absorbed from tradition and handed down to posterity without the possibility of improving them in any way. New divination techniques were periodically introduced, but they would not better the previous ones for they would also be based on the same symbolical logic, associating strange marks in an animal's internal organs and insights about the outcome of a battle without any causal cogency. Finally, artists too could not improve their pictorial techniques in the same way as doctors better their diagnostic capacities. Ancient art knew some form of indexical creation, for instance death masks. Molded directly on the face of the defunct, a funerary mask was created not only according to an iconic logic of resemblance, but also according to an indexical logic of causality (Zadoks and Jitta 1932: 90-5; Pohl 1938; Schuyler 1986; Schlosser 1993). The shape of the face, with its specific features, would cause the wax to be molded in a certain way. However, that was an exception, and in pictorial representation either there was no objective method to falsify a 'bad' simulacrum. A simulacrum was to be discarded if it didn't trigger

recognition of the original and therefore mental reference to it, for instance when a portrait was considered as failed because it didn't resemble a face. And yet, rejection in this case would not be objective but subjective. Reality exerts pressure on the creation of icons more than on the manipulation of symbols but less than on the determination of indexes. Furthermore, there was room for improvement also in the arts, but in a way that could be hardly codified and transmitted from generation to generation. A doctor could come up with a new diagnostic technique and codify it in teaching, either in person or through books. A painter or a sculptor could also come up with a better technique for the production of resembling simulacra, and yet this technique could not be codified and handed down to subsequent artists in the same way as a doctor would pass his knowledge to future physicians. The reason for this divergence lies exactly in the different logic the two domains would follow: the doctor would search for plausible causes behind abnormal manifestations of the body; the artist would arrange shapes and colors so that they might look like the result of a previous perception of the original. Doctors were looking for causes, artists for effects, that is why the former's procedures could be objective and codified, whereas the latter's skills intrinsically remained subjective and, to a large extent, impossible to codify. The history of western art offers a rich literature of guidance for artists (Schlosser 1924; Barocchi 1960-2); moreover, artistic apprenticeship was progressively institutionalized through academies and schools. Nevertheless, working by a famous artist's side in his workshop would always stay part and parcel of an artist's training, and the success of pictorial creation largely remain inexplicable, or be explained through vague ideas like 'talent' or 'genius' (Bloom 2002). In antiquity, the doctors who first would understand the relation between a symptom and its causes, and invent a new cure, were also revered as geniuses by their contemporaries (Nutton 2013). Yet, their creation was not mysterious. Once the cause of a disease had been found, subsequent doctors could apply the same rule to infer the same disease from the same symptoms, and prescribe the same therapy to cure it. That could not be said of an artist; certain techniques for the production of resembling simulacra, like Renaissance perspective, for instance, could be codified and handed down to subsequent artists (Poudra 1864; Panofsky 1924-5; Kemp 1990). However, most of the skills enabling a painter to evoke, through simulacra, the body of an absent lover, or of an absent god, escaped formalization and, as a consequence, transmission. In a way, each generation of artists must reinvent ex-novo the means through which artistic representations can be offered as the effect of an absent cause, because each generation of artists must face a continuously evolving audience and sense of resemblance (Baudrillard 1981; Payot 1997; Noudelmann 2012).

Contemporary medicine is incredibly more sophisticated than ancient medicine. Yet, a diagnosis that was effective in the 5th Century B.C.E. would be effective nowadays too. The human body indeed evolves in time, following the evolution of the species and yielding to the pressure of social and cultural conditions, but not with such a rapidity as to provoke the continuous obsolescence of medical knowledge. A doctor from the 1960s could easily take care of a patient of today, since therapies that proved effective in the past remain effective in the present and will keep effective in the future, if the human body does not change in the meantime. Future diagnostic or therapeutic techniques could prove more efficient, but old techniques will not cease to be effective as a consequence.

Conversely, the domain of resemblance evolves in relation to culture, not nature. The faster culture changes the quicker codes and laws of resemblance become obsolete (Calabrese 1985). A medieval portrait looks extremely primitive to the eyes of those who are familiar with photography and even the invention of photography did not stop the obsolescence of iconic techniques, on the contrary. The photograph of a face taken in the 1960s seems incredibly opaque nowadays, because codes of iconic production and resemblance have changed in the meantime, leading to flat screens, 3-D, retina definition, etc. Indeed, the way in which simulacra are related to their originals does not respond to a causal logic but to an iconic one, which is largely influenced by subjective considerations and even more by cultural fashions (Mosquera 2011). Great artists who are revered across the epochs, then, are those who are deemed to have grasped some universal laws of representation, thus creating icons that defy the passing of time and the evolution of perceptual customs. However, no artist is immune from the danger of obsolescence (Lotman 2009).

4. Time and language in semiotic modes.

More generally, the logics according to which doctors, artists, and haruspices bridge the gap between known and unknown, visible and invisible, perceptible and imperceptible, present and absent, differ in the way in which they respond to time and language. Haruspices can verbally describe the 'technique' through which they associate omens and predictions. Yet, they cannot explain in words why they do so. They can only refer to tradition, for instance to rituals handed down to them by previous haruspices. Nature does not exert any pressure on haruspices, since their modes of thinking cannot be falsified. However, what makes pressure on them is doxa, that is, beliefs shared by community (Lotman 2001). The less people believe

in the connection haruspices make between omens and predictions, the less their work will be valued, remunerated, and even tolerated. With the advent of Christianity, and the affirmation of a new model explaining the transcendent forces acting in human life, haruspices were simply swept away, and their 'knowledge' survived only by transmogrifying into aspects of the new system of beliefs (Jones 2014).

The knowledge of doctors also is, to a certain extent, under the pressure of culture. Definitions of 'good health', 'pain', and even 'death' have changed throughout history with the rapidity of culture (Ariès 1977; Horstmanshoff, King, and Zittel 2012; Corbellini 2014). Yet, definitions of death have not changed so much as to completely revolutionize the human understanding of medicine. Present-day medical students still take the Hippocratic oath, and acknowledge that their success will rely on their scientific knowledge, not on faithfulness to tradition (Fantini and Lambrichs 2014). They learn through long training which techniques have proven efficacious in bettering and prolonging human life. If they are talented and lucky, they themselves will come up with new knowledge and methods to better dispel death from the existential horizon of patients. Differently from divination techniques, medical knowledge evolves independently from systems of beliefs and human cognitions (Sicard and Vigarello 2011; Rongièrès 2013). Penicillin is efficacious against bacteria even if the majority of people does not believe so, and what compels its medical usage is not doxa but evidence: people treated with penicillin survive, others die. The causal nature of medical knowledge allows medical hypotheses to be verbally formulated, transmitted to future generations of physicians, tested, and falsified by the emergence of more effective knowledge (Smith, Meyers, and Cook 2014). That is why present-day doctors can be extremely certain that their knowledge, methods, and techniques are better than those of their medieval predecessors. Contemporary artists cannot hold the same certainty. The efficacy by which they create simulacra is totally disconnected from nature and entirely depends on the fluctuation of cultural modes. A 20th-century cubist painting would have been pure visual noise to a Renaissance observer, and yet to a 21st-century observer it evokes cognitions and emotions more effectively than Renaissance painting could ever do (Leone 2012 *On Aniconicity*). Present-day museum visitors still cherish Leonardo, and acknowledge that his simulacra are able to challenge the passing of time. Yet, they also acknowledge that Guernica strike them more than the Battle of Anghiari, the former being more able than the latter to represent the horrors of aerial bombing and technological warfare. Like the predictions of haruspices, the simulacra of artists cannot be falsified, since they connect the visible and the invisible, the present and the absence in a way entirely depending on laws of resemblance that do not lie in

nature but in culture (Gombrich 1960). Recognition indeed stems from matching between an artist's representational skills and the cultural assumptions of the observer, but such matching follows schemes that can neither verbally codified nor tested against evidence. The success of an icon ultimately depends on its ability to connect, or even to anticipate, the cultural sensibility of an audience, and yet since this continuously changes, icons inevitably lose and acquire efficaciousness depending on the fluctuations of cultural modes and fashions (Calabrese 1987).

After such meandering reasoning a recapitulation is in order. The essay has identified three domains of activities at the origin of the western semiotic sensibility: divination, medicine, and the fine arts. In all three domains, the gap between unknown and known, invisible and visible, absent and present, is bridged through specific skills and operations, whose complexity requires the establishment of professional figures: the haruspex, the doctor, and the artist. The ways in which these three figures bridge the gap between ontologically distinguished dimensions is, nevertheless, different. Haruspices rely on tradition. Their ritual knowledge cannot be falsified. Its motivations can neither be verbalized nor transmitted through learning. It cannot be improved according to evolutionary schemes and its efficacy entirely depends on consensus. As systems of belief change, haruspices' divinations are abandoned, their way of associating visible and invisible discarded or transformed into new beliefs.

Doctors do not rely on tradition but on science. Their scientific knowledge can be falsified. Its motivations are causal, and can therefore be put into words and codified into systematic learning. Medical knowledge, as a consequence, improves according to evolutionary lines, its efficacy depending not on consensus but on patients' survival. That is why medical diagnostic and therapeutic techniques do not change along with cultural systems of beliefs but, to a large extent, improve as knowledge of the human body improves.

Artists rely neither on tradition nor on science. There is tradition in the arts, but it does not vouch for the efficacy of simulacra. Iconicity is what grounds an artist's ability to evoke absent objects, emotions, or cognitions, but the laws of iconicity are cultural, not natural, and do not change according to evolutionary schemes. They cannot be falsified or codified. From this point of view, the success of artists is similar to that of haruspices, meaning that it depends on the agreement they manage to elicit in an audience. However, the ontological direction along which such consensus is sought for is different. Haruspices rely on tradition in order to show what mysterious causes affect the world; artists rely on invention in order to produce the effects that those absent causes are expected to produce.

The following sections will look for the echoes of these three modes of thinking in present-day society.

5. Haruspices.

Who are the haruspices of today? What professional figures operate with the mode of thinking that was characteristic of ancient divination? Despite the phenomenal progress of science in explaining the laws that rule nature and, to a minor extent, culture, humans still live under the impression that their lives are partially controlled by unknown forces. The contemporary human being is not as dominated by fear of these forces as the prehistoric, or the medieval human were, and has developed cognitive, emotional, and pragmatic strategies to cope with uncertainty. Whenever possible, scientific research is invoked in order to explain, and sometimes even divert, the evil forces that loom large in the life of an individual or a community. Yet, for a vast part of humanity, resort to science and technology so as to foresee and prevent undesired twists of destiny is still extremely difficult, if not impossible. Moreover, even in the most scientifically and technologically advanced societies, several central issues still escape being framed by a causal, indexical mode of thinking (Bunzl 2015). Some of the most devastating catastrophes that periodically strike humanity, killing thousands of people, such as earthquakes, tsunamis, or epidemics, are generated by invisible forces that scientific research has not yet been able to univocally link with visible phenomena anticipating them (Fra Paleo 2015). Geologists continuously monitor the earth, searching for clues about when the next earthquake might happen. Contemporary seismology has developed incredibly sophisticated strategies and tools in order to both expand the range of such clues and improve the capacity of inferring from them the probability of future events (Coen 2013). The territories of the two economically and technologically most advanced societies in the present-day world, USA and Japan, include severely seismic areas; as a consequence, impressive scientific efforts are sustained and carried on in these two countries in order to develop the ability to foresee and prevent earthquakes (Stein 2010; Smits 2013; Smits 2014). And yet, as the tragic events that struck Japan in March 2011 demonstrate, such efforts are still largely insufficient (Samuels 2013). People in these countries still live in fear that a catastrophe might soon take place, unforeseeable, uncontrollable.

The example of earthquakes brings back to the fore the issue of the relation between visible and invisible, perceptible and imperceptible, manifest and secret. Modern seismology has

come up with strategies and tools that widen the domain of perceptibility (Ferrari 2014). Micro-geological events likely to announce a future catastrophe can be detected as they would never in the past. Nevertheless, a secret lies in the depth of the earth that is still invisible to science. Something happens there that causes the catastrophe, and yet it is only a posteriori, when the devastating earthquake has already happened, that the catastrophe can be indexically connected with what caused it. A priori, on the contrary, no events can be detected, even through sophisticated technology, that anticipate the calamity to happen. Perhaps in the future science will be able to enlarge the domain of perceptibility, diving into the nucleus of the earth, to the extent that earthquakes will be predicted with timely and infallible efficaciousness (Massa and Camassi 2013). In the meantime, though, the kind of discourse that circulates before and after one of such calamities reveals the mode of thinking that emerges in human communities when science fails to explain and control the threatening forces of nature (Quarantelli 1998).

After the earthquake that devastated the Italian city of L'Aquila and the surrounding areas in April 2009, killing hundreds of people and destroying houses and monuments, media dwelled at length on the story of Giampaolo Gioacchino Giuliani,ⁱⁱⁱ an astrophysics technician who claimed to have predicted the event through a new seismographic technique based on releases of radon gas (Giuliani and Fiorani 2009). Relatives of the victims and commentators were outraged that such maverick voice had not been listened to, and threatened to sue official seismologists and competent authorities. Scientists subsequently demonstrated, as it was obvious since the beginning, that the new method was actually not one (Kerr 2009). The seismographic technique proposed by the independent researcher was indeed unable to single out a causal relation between perceptible geological events and imperceptible tectonic phenomena causing major earthquakes. In reality, the independent researcher was just exploiting the wave of irrationality produced by the earthquake in order to validate his seismologic theory against the mainstream one. Nevertheless, his mode of thinking was closer to that of an ancient haruspex than to the mode of thinking of an old physician. Ex post, he was arbitrarily associating seismographic data and seismic phenomena, claiming that the former were indexes of the latter. In reality, they were not indexes but symbols, which a pseudo-scientific discourse connected with their cause. Scientists could easily falsify these pseudo-causal theories. However, even nowadays there are people who believe that, by adopting such alternative seismographic strategy, lives could have been saved. The attention of media has meanwhile moved elsewhere, and yet on the Internet and especially in social

networks still linger the opinions of those who affirm that the truth was concealed on purpose, to cover responsibilities, or even to benefit those who speculated on reconstruction. More generally, the example offers a first answer about where the mode of thinking of ancient haruspices is to be found in present-day technologically advanced societies. Every time that science fails in associating major calamities with phenomena or events whose early detection might predict or even control the catastrophe, media and communities circulate discourse in which the visible and the invisible, the perceptible and the imperceptible, are linked according to a mode of thinking that resembles that of ancient divination (Lebovic and Killen 2014; November and Leanza 2015). The unusual conformation of a sacrificed animal's liver is visible evidence of the adversity of the gods, who will strike the community with a sudden calamity (Petropoulou 2008). Analogously, the uncanny configuration of seismographic data is the perceptible effect of that which is taking place in the depths of the earth, leading to a major catastrophe. In both cases, a connection is surmised whose rationale can neither be verbalized nor codified. Nobody interrogates the haruspex about how he came up with the connection, and no journalist really questions the independent scholar about his alleged capacity to save human lives. On the one hand, media lack scientific competence to challenge pseudo-scientists, as ancient laymen would lack competence to question haruspices about their divination techniques. On the other hand, pseudo-scientific theories are not challenged for their circulation befits a fundamental purpose, and attracts attention and profits as a result: presenting symbolical connections as indexical links, pseudo-scientists and media reinforce the trust in the human ability to detect and control nature, offering to bereaved relatives and terrified spectators the idea that they are not living in a chaotic, mysterious world but that, more simply, they are living in a world with a culprit.

Indeed, when haruspices would single out and identify indexes in the internal organs of a sacrificed animal or in the flight of birds, they would not only associate the invisible forces looming large in the life of the community to the visible consequences of their capriciousness. They would introduce the idea of an agency, of a personal intentionality, behind those consequences (Leone 2009 *Agency*). An earthquake, a drought, or a famine were not simply the result of an impersonal, evil energy, but the effect of a will, of a god whose cognitions, emotions, and actions closely resemble those of human beings.

In the same way, when pseudo-science and media introduce a culprit into the scene of a catastrophe, they are not only activating a pseudo-indexical mode of thinking through an arbitrary association, but they are also attributing a face, a will, an intentionality, and therefore an agency, to the catastrophe. Accepting that the catastrophe 'just happened', and

that there was nothing to do to prevent and divert it, is more difficult than accepting that the catastrophe happened because of a cause that could have been detected in advance, which in turn is more difficult to accept than the idea that someone actually wanted the catastrophe, and intentionally plotted so that it would not be prevented. Indeed, humanity is impotent in relation to the first hypothesis, and all it can do is just patiently wait for science to investigate further and become more efficient. The second hypothesis is more palatable because it comes with the idea that something can be done in the present time, just giving space and voice to those who are more proficient than mainstream scientists at detecting the visible omens of future, invisible catastrophes. However, the most satisfactory hypothesis is the third one. The evilness of nature is replaced by the evilness of a personal, intentional agency. Hypotheses of this kind, albeit false, circulate widely, and are easily sold by the media, for they allow the reactivation of a whole series of human 'agencies of redressing'. The first of these agencies is the law. If there is a culprit, then justice can and must be done, for the moral satisfaction of the victims and in order for it not to happen anymore.

In particular circumstances, then, contemporary humans still resort to the present-day version of haruspices so as to illusorily reaffirm a sense of control over nature. Three main questions must be asked about the discourse of 'modern divination': first, what is its specificity in relation to similar modes of thinking in contemporary societies; second, what is its specific operational dynamic, for instance the way in which it selects and 'frames' a culprit; and third, what is the role of semiotics, if any, vis-à-vis the haruspices of today.

6. The semiotic specificity of modern divination.

A revealing indicator about a culture is its regime of temporality. Some societies insistently focus on the past, obsessively celebrating their mythical ancestors, narrating and re-narrating the history of the community, preserving with apprehensive devotion every relic of the past. Other human groups, on the contrary, are completely absorbed by the present. They do not care about what preceded the instant in which they currently live, nor do they muse or plan about the future; the senses of the whole society are directed at a full immersion into what is thought, felt, and done on the spot. Finally, in this simple tripartite categorization, some cultures are constantly concentrating on their future. They do not cherish their history, nor do they enjoy the fleeting present, but tenaciously plan, project, foresee, and predict (Koselleck 1979).

Each of these temporal attitudes, then, can take two opposite emotional flavors: on the one hand, the past, present, or future of a society will be respectively treasured with pride, consumed with voluptuousness, or awaited with hopefulness; on the other hand, they will be looked at with regret or nostalgia, suffered in anguish, or anticipated in fear (Del Marco and Pezzini 2012). In any case, both reconstruction of the past and anticipation of the future, whether they take place in joy or fear, anguish or nostalgia, require an intense activity bridging the material and the immaterial, the visible and the invisible (Lozano 1987; Leone 2014 *Longing*). ‘Societies of the past’ cannot limit themselves to worship their relics; they must also reconnect these traces of a remote eon to full representations of it, to figurations that recreate a perceptible simulacrum of a vanished past through the surviving vestiges of it (Ginzburg 2006; 2014). Symmetrically, ‘societies of the future’ must invest cognitive and also emotional resources to project in front of themselves a full scenario of how the life of individuals and communities will be (Boscaljon 2014). This operation too entails creating a meaningful relation between present perceptions and speculations about the future. In both cases, the modes of thinking that were described above can be adopted so as to elaborate a society’s discourse of the past/the future. From this specific point of view, contemporary archeology can be compared with modern seismology: they both seek for establishing indexical connections between traces and representations; the former creates simulacra of past epochs around archeological vestiges (Cohen 2011); the latter produces representations of future states around geological clues. In both cases, the operation of retrospective/prospective simulation of the past/the future is entrusted to professionals, whose ability to detect and re-elaborate traces spans over a larger range, thanks to the ability to operate by means of sophisticated ‘reconstructive’ technology. However, like seismologic anticipations of the future, so also archeological and historical reconstructions of the past can be infiltrated by pseudo-indexical logics, which seem to connect the visible and the invisible through causal links, but actually bring forth arbitrary simulacra (Geary and Klaniczay 2013). That is the case of revisionism, whose manipulation of agency is comparable to that of conspiracy theories (Shermer 2000). In conspiracy theories, a scapegoat is identified so as to introduce a personal, intentional agency into the explanation of how mysterious forces alter and endanger the life of a community (Butter 2014). Accusing scientists of purposely hiding evidence about earthquakes reintroduce a logic of control in relation to what escapes the human ability to predict and divert a tragic future. However, societies of the past are not immune from this agentive fallacy. The past is, by definition, what cannot be changed. As a consequence, it is beyond the control and agency of human

communities even more than the future is. A past war and its tragic toll of casualties weigh on a community's feeling of impotence even more than a future, unpredictable calamity does (Violi 2014). From this perspective, revisionism serves the same social purpose as conspiracy theories. It empowers communities by bestowing upon them the delusional sentiment that the past too can be changed, for instance by coming up with representations that deny indexical evidence and replace it with pseudo-causal connections, identifying agencies and responsibilities that were unseen theretofore.

To recapitulate, the mode of thinking of haruspices is at work in contemporary societies not only as regards unfounded prospections into the future, but also as regards undocumented retrospections into the past. In both cases, visible traces (seismologic graphs, archaeological evidence) are arbitrarily connected with representations (prediction of catastrophes, historical scenarios) of their invisible contexts (future states of calamity, past courses of action) but presented as results of specific agencies, as past or future effects of specific causes. 'Modern divination', then, can be detected in societies that focus on the past, as well as in societies that focus on the future, every time that the gap between what is known and what is no longer (past) or not yet (future) known is filled by resorting to symbolical, arbitrary simulacra.

There is no indexical link between available seismologic evidence and earthquakes predicted by pseudo-scientists, as there is no indexical link between available archeological evidence and scenarios reconstructed by pseudo-historians, and yet they both proliferate and thrive because they introduce a hostile agency into an otherwise impersonal narrative scene. By surmising a conspiracy aimed at silencing non-mainstream scientists in order to profit from unpredicted calamities or at censoring alternative historians so as to serve the ideology of a ruling lobby, contemporary haruspices actually convey a message that is quite similar to that entailed by their ancient colleagues: the community is intentionally left bereft of knowledge and control over either its past or its future; haruspices deserve power and consideration because they know how to redress such unbalance. The discourse of haruspices then usually generates a vicious circle in which they offer the representation of an empowered community but simultaneously are empowered by the community they claim to empower. Through fallacious representations of the past or the future, they soothe the anguish of their contemporaries but receive real power in recompense.

Thus far, the first of the questions above has been answered, namely, what is the specificity of the mode of thinking that was characteristic of ancient haruspices and in what modern versions can be found in contemporary societies. Prospective and retrospective creation of

pseudo-indexical links is the essence of this particular mode of thinking. The following section will be devoted to describing in detail how these pseudo-causal simulacra are brought about. The main question to answer to this regard is: how is it possible to point at a cause, where there isn't any?

7. The semiotic invention of causes.

In order to answer the question above, one must first investigate the nature of indexicality. When is it that a causal connection, relying upon contiguity of forces, can be established between what is perceptible and what is not? For instance, how was it possible to determine that the development of lung cancer is the direct consequence of a life habit of tobacco smoking, to the extent that the two elements are currently strongly interconnected and almost replaceable? Today, when we see a relative or close friend smoking, we immediately feel preoccupation at the consequent idea that they are likely to develop lung cancer. At the same time, when we know of someone who is suffering from lung cancer, the question that immediately forms in our mind is “was he or she a smoker?”

However, for as much natural this two-way connection might seem nowadays, it has taken a long time, and huge efforts, to establish itself in most western societies (Berridge 2013). French movies from the 1960s and 1970s feature heroes who are constantly chain-smoking, lighting cigarettes in rapid succession and filling the scene with thick, greyish clouds (Lovato 2003; Gombeaud 2008). At that time, though, spectators would not think “this character is going to develop lung cancer”; or “this character is a bad example for teenagers”, since smoking was a perceptible element that culture would connect with many invisible connotations, but none of them included the causal relation between smoking tobacco and developing lung cancer. The aura emanating from cigarettes in cinema and popular culture was symbolically attached to them: holding a cigarette between one's fingers was the indispensable mark of smartness. In order for the connotation of cinematic smoking to turn from symbolical into indexical, to such an extent that smoking was eventually banned from movies, a long scientific and legal battle had to be engaged (Timmermann 2014). First, medical evidence had to be gathered and corroborated, pointing at the causal connection between habit and disease. Then, such indexical connection had to gain momentum and strength in society, politics, and law. Huge economic interests were at stake, and tobacco

lobbies sought for years to construct counter-representations, claiming that medical research on lung cancer was following the wrong hypothesis (Linder 2012).

The example shows what is needed for an indexical connection to take place in culture: the mark and its invisible content must, of course, be related through a link of physical and causal contiguity, like fire and smoke. Today, thanks to medical research, we know that tobacco smoking provokes lung cancer, to the point that the law of many countries obliges cigarettes producers to write it black on white on cigarette packs. Indeed, nobody yet, not even medical research financed by tobacco lobbies, was able to prove the opposite. From this point of view, the issue is not controversial anymore (Proctor 2011). Nevertheless, establishing the causal connection between tobacco and cancer was not enough to turn the former into an index of the latter, and vice versa. The connection must be recognized as such. In other words, the connection must become part of knowledge shared by a certain community and taken for granted as a habit, as a relation that is not questioned any longer.

That is how an indexical connection takes place in culture, becoming ground for a whole series of communicative actions. If today someone dares smoking in a school, the fact that we can have him or her immediately censored and fined depends on the fact that the causal connection between tobacco smoking and lung cancer has taken indexical force in society. The smoker is seen as someone who is directly injecting the sparkle of cancer in our veins. That is the strength of indexicality, but that is also its weakness. Indeed, the example above suggests that for a causal relation to develop binding evidence and pragmatic force in society, corroborating its subsistence through empirical evidence is not sufficient. It is not sufficient to come up with the hypothesis of such relation, testing it through experiments or corroborating it by statistics, while falsifying and rejecting opposite hypotheses. For the causal relation to become an indexical bind, it must become a cultural habit.

The problem is that that is true for non-indexical relations too. There is no causal connection between chain-smoking in a movie and displaying charisma; it is an association that developed movie after movie, perhaps also at the urge of the tobacco industry. Smoking hero after smoking hero, it became awkward for spectators to see protagonists gesture empty-handed; on the contrary, a true hero had to constantly manipulate a cigarette and its accessories, turned into visible, symbolical reminders of the protagonist's charismatic and erotic force. The same goes for icons: for a gesture to become iconic, and develop a relation with a prototype, such relation cannot be established only by virtue of resemblance. It must also be deposited in the cultural awareness of the community, thus becoming a habit.

This long explanation was necessary to introduce the main mechanism through which contemporary divination works. It bestows the force of a habit upon a non-causal connection, thus pretending that it is an indexical one. It links two elements, a perceptible mark and its invisible content, in a way that the connection becomes culturally recognized although it is empirically unfounded. For instance, that is the way in which most medical conspiracy theories work. There is no corroborating empirical evidence that vaccines cause autism (Gerber and Offit 2009; DeStefano et al. 2013). Yet, conspiracy theories generate a discourse as a result of which the relation between the former and the latter is presented as endowed with the same causal indexicality linking tobacco smoking and lung cancer (as an example, see the infamous article Wakefield et al. 1998, which started the controversy on autism and vaccination). Associating autism and vaccines becomes a social habit, silently spreading through informal conversation, social networks, and slowly but inexorably rising to the status of shared, unquestioned knowledge (Oliver and Wood 2014). There is not too much difference between the ancient haruspex who, having singled out some marks in the internal organs of a sacrificed animal, would announce to the community that these marks would stand for the anger of the gods — thus being a causal, indexical effect of it — and the conspiracy theorist who, having selected an element whatsoever that happens to sometimes co-occur with autism, such as being vaccinated, proclaims that the latter is the cause of the former. In both cases, a casual relation is presented as a causal link, and turned into an indexical bond by the force of the habit.

The question to be asked at this stage is: how is it possible that a symbolical connection, arbitrarily bridging the gap between known and unknown, perceptible and imperceptible, visible and invisible, turns into a cultural habit in the same way as a causal connection does? In other words, shouldn't the discourse of science on autism and its causes hold a greater place in the shared knowledge of a present-day community than conspiracy theories proposing arbitrary explanations under the guise of indexicality? How can a symbolical connection rule and bind as much or even more than a causal one?

Again, as in the case of conspiracy theories on earthquakes, pseudo-medical explanations spread and dominate not because they find a cause, but because they display one. They introduce a personal, intentional agency in a scenario that science would rather leave without culprits, or with the indication of many culprits. Arbitrary connection between vaccination and autism takes the indexical force and the cultural value of a causal link because it identifies a human will beyond an evil, exactly like haruspices would explain calamities as consequence of the gods' hostility, uncannily displaying itself in an animal's intestines. The comparison

leads to the hypothesis that what turns an association of two elements — a mark and its supposed invisible content — into a habit is largely independent from the content. It is independent from the mark as well. Indeed, it is only by virtue of this independence that a farfetched conspiracy theory can gain the same cultural status as a corroborated empirical hypothesis. Further evidence of this independence is that the visible terms of ‘modern divination’ can be replaced as freely as the perceptible omens of ancient divination, without any decrease in the power of generating indexical illusion. Ancient divination relied on the most various marks: the shape of sacrificed animals’ internal organs; the flight of birds; the lines on a person’s hand; on one’s forehead; etc. None of these marks were causally related to their supposed content; hence they were, to a certain extent, interchangeable. In the same way, conspiracy theories can easily replace the agent of conspiracy without losing their ability to spread pseudo-indexical habits. Autism in children is caused by exposition to their parents’ cell phones waves, they could claim.

If the indexical illusion of ‘modern divination’ is as independent from its specific content as that of ancient divination was, then where does it lie? The following paragraphs will claim that it lies in an effect of discourse; in a pattern; in a structure. What are the ingredients that are necessary to come up with an effective instance of modern divination? Through what optical illusion can two causally unrelated elements be presented as causally related, gain indexical force, and turn into the interpretive habit of a community? Two keywords are fundamental in the elaboration of this illusion: agency and narrativity.

8. Agency and narrativity in contemporary divination.

Recent cognitive theories suggest that the ability to read events in the environment as caused by agency might be the result of adaptive evolution (Boyd 2009). Humans can elaborate mental representations in which phenomena do not only happen, but are provoked by other beings or entities provided with intentionality and agency, that is, with the capacity to turn one’s internal representations into a course of action (Leone 2009 *Attanti*). Thanks to this adaptive ability, human beings can, among other things, try to predict and prevent a potential danger by associating its occurrence with that which is considered the agency that could bring it about (Sterelny 2001). However, like many other adaptive cognitive features of human beings, the ability to explain the environment through attribution of agency can backfire, especially if the environment is no longer a jungle where simple relations obtain between

preys and predators, but a sophisticated symbolical environment in which an increasing number of events take place automatically, or anyway without clear display of agency (Godfrey-Smith 2001).

The financial crisis that has strangled most of the western world since 2007-2008 is an excellent example. For many human beings who receive representations of the crisis through mass media, social networks, or through conversation with friends and relatives, the crisis is a sort of predator (Bauman 2014). It threatens to snatch away from them their job, their security, and their dignity. For many, this threat has become a reality: because of the crisis, millions of people around the world have seen their professional and personal lives destroyed (Gamble 2014). In verbal representations of this tragedy, the crisis is the subject. The problem is that “crisis” is an abstract noun. Saying that “the crisis has disrupted the harmony of my family” is not the same as saying “a tiger has killed and devoured my children”. Human beings are biologically programmed to attribute intentionality and agency to a tiger, but not to an abstract entity like a financial crisis. A tiger is a hungry animal. In order to feed itself and its offspring, it has to kill and eat other animals. That is something that human beings too do, and recognize. They also are a dangerous agency for other animals. Being able to recognize the link between the aggression of a tiger and its agency is fundamental in order to foresee and possibly prevent the danger. The tiger attacks because it is hungry. It wants to eat, therefore plans and executes a course of action. If I, human being, understand this, then I can manage to protect my offspring and myself by avoiding the tiger, or even by learning to decode the traces that it leaves in the environment (Whiten 1991). Strange swishes among the leaves can be detected and decoded as audible traces of an invisible and terrible agency, to be fled from by all means.

But what are the traces announcing the approaching of a financial crisis? Some of the best economists of the world were unable to predict its advent, some others became world-famous exactly because they anticipated what nobody was able to see come (Taleb 2007). For the vast majority of people, however, there were absolutely no clues of what was going to happen and destroy their lives. Economic and financial indicators hastily running in the bottom banner of TV news were undecipherable hieroglyphs to them. Indeed, the main problem with the financial crisis was not that its looming was not announced by any understandable mark, but that the human ability to explain and, to a certain extent, anticipate dangers through cognitive attributions of agency could not work in these circumstances (Bandura 2006). What kind of an agent is, indeed, the crisis? The crisis is not a tiger, although it kills more than it. It is an abstract entity behind which a myriad of intricately interconnected phenomena lie. In front of

this nebula of invisible agencies, media, experts, and lay people adopt exactly the same cognitive patterns that prehistoric human beings would resort to in order to explain the aggressive behavior of a tiger. They seek to attribute an agency. However, the result is conducive to what has been labeled above as ‘modern divination’.

On the one hand, abstract entities, deprived of any personal intentionality, are personalized and endowed with their own agency. Media start circulating representations in which “the crisis has started”; “the crisis is spreading”; “the crisis is taking its toll of jobs”; etc. (Greuter 2014). In these and other representations, the crisis itself becomes a subject, as if it were a ferocious animal whose deeds are totally independent from the agency of human beings. On the other hand, other agencies are singled out beyond that of the crisis, but attributed, again, to abstract, impersonal entities. From this point of view, the way in which media represent the financial markets is almost hilarious. In many cases, they are attributed not only personal agencies, as if they were malign spirits rampaging behind the curtains of the crisis; to complete the delusional effect of the human cognition of agency, they are given an emotional flavor too: “the markets suffer today”; “the markets today are shy”; “they are angry”; etc. (Peltzer, Lämmle, and Wagenknecht 2012).

The problem with these representations is that they have the same social effect that ancient divination would have when attributing the agency of famines or draughts to the gods’ hostility. On the one hand, they dissimulate human agencies lying beyond the calamity; angry gods, not the wrong decisions of the emperor, are starving the people (Starkman 2014). On the other hand, since they offer representations that cannot satisfy the human instinct for agency attribution, they implicitly encourage the quest for a culprit, for the agent that truly provoked the catastrophe.

A second keyword is essential to understand this passage: “narrativity” (Lorusso, Paolucci, and Violi 2012). Indeed, when human beings adapt ancestral cognitive schemes to understand complex contemporary phenomena, they inevitably come up with unsatisfactory representations, which cannot result in any course of action. Human beings need to recognize the tiger as an agent not only in order to explain its aggression and predict its occurrence, but also because they have to posit an enemy to fight. But how can “the crisis” be fought and contrasted? Or how can “the markets” be attributed an agency that leads to a contrastive plan and course of action? Human beings look for a culprit that they can posit as a counter-subject in a narrative, and as a consequence must attribute the responsibility of the catastrophe not to an impersonal entity but to a personal enemy, which can be fought, persecuted, and eliminated exactly like a tiger in a jungle. How human groups select the personal agent to

which they attribute the role of the foe in a narrative scheme of representation and action is what the following paragraphs will deal with.

According to Algirdas J. Greimas' generative semiotics, a narrative drive lies at the core of every cultural manifestation (Greimas 1970). Classical narratives, such as folk tales, for instance, are the most typical embodiment of this mechanism (Greimas 1985). Through these texts, a society creates and circulates a discourse in which central values are affirmed and re-affirmed. Indeed, since societies are subject to the passing of time, and therefore to the succession of generations and the menace of oblivion, values must be enshrined in cultural artifacts that survive the accidents of time. Non-genetically transmitted patrimony of humanity, culture is the series of choices that a society wants to hand down to its future, having inherited it from its past (Leone 2010 *Analisi*). Some human groups have found that freedom is an essential value for their prosperity. This value has affirmed itself through historical, political and social events, like revolutions for instance. Yet, for the memory and effective presence of this value to persist in society, freedom must be not only inculcated through abstract education, but also inscribed in the social psyche through narratives, which coat this value with the tricks and twists of storytelling (Früh and Frey 2014).

One of the great intuitions of Greimas for the development of cultural theory is the idea that values that are able to transmogrify into stories enjoy a quasi-evolutionary benefit (Greimas 1976). They survive the passing of time and defy forgetfulness because they are remembered under the guise of heroes and foes. The Western culture has reveled in the deeds of these heroes — despising their enemies — for millennia, along the two main lines of the Homeric narratives and the Biblical ones. Listeners, then readers of these stories have cognitively but above all emotionally partaken in siding with the characters of these stories, escaping with them from the captivity of an evil King or combating an invading population; yet, Greimas and his semiotics suggest that underneath this enjoyment, invisible to most but the analysts of narration, runs the impersonal discourse in which neither human beings nor gods oppose and fight each other, but values, ways of understanding human life, and arranging its social institutions accordingly (Greimas 1976).

The story of Moses continues to morph epoch after epoch into ever changing expressive formulae, from the verbal encoding of the Bible to its visual rendering by 3D cinematic narratives (Leone 2014 *L'anima*); yet, beneath these variations, there persists an invisible structure that, through different means, reiterates the same message to each generation of human beings, a message in which freedom and identity overcome captivity and alienation. The same master character of this narrative, an imperceptible but personal god leading his

people toward liberation and self-awareness, in the eyes of structural semiotics is nothing but the cultural and social instance that promotes this self-understanding of humanity as endowed with transcendent liberty. Yet, as Greimas suggests, the idea of a subsistence of human access to transcendent liberty would not be able to maintain its grasp on human beings were it not translated into the titanic will of Moses, and the awe-inducing mastery of his god, and the heinous antagonism of the pharaoh.

The patterning force of narratives is such that, as it was pointed out earlier, human beings do not seek for stories only in culture, but also in society and, paradoxically, in nature (Marrone 2012). A disrupting financial crisis or a devastating earthquake do not remain as abstract events in the collective consciousness but immediately turn into agents, into subjects that move about in society and act, leaving behind disastrous signs of their passage, deeds, and even emotions. Earthquakes and financial crises rage through society, seen by their victims as protean monsters, but their abstractness is nevertheless too great to satisfy the human appetite for stories, protagonists, heroes, and villains. As epical or mythical narratives provide collectivities with the personification of a social order, in which certain values triumph over certain other values under the guise of heroes and foes, so the social *imaginaire* needs to explain and rearrange the disorder of calamities by reproducing the narrative pattern that divides evil and good and personifies them through culprits and victims, villains and avengers (Carr 2014).

That is the ultimate nature of conspiracy theories: reintroducing a patterning order that applies a narrative logic to social events, be they historical or present, and identifying a personal mask for impersonal values (Caumanns and Niendorf 2001). The projection of this mask on the negative values that circulate in society through the financial crisis, for instance, allows societies to reassure themselves through the identification of a culprit. Those who create, elaborate, or disseminate conspiracy theories semiotically work like haruspices: they connect present traces to supposed agencies, fabricating an illusion of indexicality.

An example will better clarify such dynamics. On January 24, 2015, the European Central Bank through his Director, Mr Mario Draghi, and the media announced that unprecedented resources of the ECB would be used, in the next year, to purchase public debt from European countries struck by the crisis. Headlines in newspapers, TV programs, and websites all used the same pattern: they pointed out how “stock exchange markets were celebrating”; “financial markets were euphoric”; “the Euro was breathing again”; etc. However, few commentators explained in detail how this massive anti-crisis measures would affect common citizens and, even more importantly, they did not attach a personal agency to the image of “triumphant

markets". In most cases, readers of such titles were left alone with the task of associating a face, and a name, to such abstract designation of emotional status. Who are the individuals, or at least the groups, who would be "celebrating" the Central European Bank's purchase of public debt? And whose are the lungs that are "breathing better" at such news? (Greuter 2014)

Contemporary haruspices intervene exactly to obviate this lack of personal indexicality. Since the hands and faces behind macro-financial actions cannot be detected, present-time haruspices garner traces from the surface of the global media discourse in order to attach them to a persona. In several circumstances, this modern divinatory operation follows a predetermined pattern, and insists on the same line of pseudo-indexicality: those who are celebrating are a lobby of powerful individuals, belonging to an organized but secret group, who are maneuvering behind the curtains in order to displace huge amounts of public resources into private pockets and enslave larger and larger sections of the public opinion (Bilewicz 2015). In Greimasian terms, the announcement of a macro-financial action by an institutional actor and the representation of the impersonal passions that it triggers moves the public opinion, led by opinion leaders-haruspices, to come up with the idea and the personification of a "sender" (Danblon and Loïc 2010). The agency behind the anti-crisis measure is given the mask of a social group, and pseudo-indexical ties are established between what is visible in the media arena and supposedly invisible lobbies acting in the mysterious background of global economy. The irrational creation of an evil "sender", which motivates and empowers the hand of institutional subjects like the European Central Bank, is the necessary step to underline an axiology, and therefore the opposition between a secret, invisible force and the painful effects it produces in history.

In ancient divination, haruspices would explain natural catastrophes or war defeats by attributing their responsibility to invisible gods, which had to be appeased in order for the curse to be removed; in modern divination, faceless global changes are linked with pseudo-personal agents, which become culprits and targets of public indignation. It is fundamental to underline that indignation is not the problem. Suffering generated by the economic crisis in Europe, and especially in Southern-European countries, is not imaginary. It is confirmed both by quantitative and qualitative data. Statistics bear out the distress of societies, the dramatic unemployment of young people, the population decline. Personal and public narratives add a qualitative voice to numbers: people despair, leave their country, or even put an end to their lives in the most dramatic cases. However, to a dispassionate observer, indignation appears misplaced in a way that can be easily manipulated. Negative emotional energy is directed

toward the supposed agents of public suffering, but few give rational directions in order to channel such anger. Two cases most commonly occur: on the one hand, the agency behind the economic crisis and the human disasters it provokes remains abstract, impersonal, and faceless. People are encouraged to voice their complaint, but this voice has no object, and therefore no pragmatic grasp over society and its economy. Present-day haruspices benefit from public anger but do not direct it toward a target, and as a result do not promote change. To pamphleteers that accuse the invisible god of the markets as responsible of public distress, it is utterly convenient that such distress does not find its cause, and does not act to remove it. It is ignorance of the invisible hands behind the visible signs of catastrophe, indeed, that justifies the practice of present-day divination.

On the other hand, agency behind suffering is displayed, but through the fabrication of pseudo-indexical ties. Traces are disorderly collected and arranged in predetermined patterns in order to 'explain' the causes of the crisis and its human disasters. However, haruspices who benefit from exposing these pseudo-indexical links in reality do not rationally explain anything. They limit themselves to put forward a culprit, and therefore satisfy the angry social demand of personal agency (Bratich 2008). The migrants, the Jews, the Germans, the southern-Europeans, the Protestants, or even imaginary lobbies such as the "Illuminati" are designated as responsible of the public distress (Taguieff 2005). Traces are singled out and denounced that would point out the way in which these groups of individuals would purposefully generate financial and economic catastrophes in order to personally take advantage from them. However, indexical relations decried by modern divination are never demonstrated through solid evidence but rather emphasized through conspiratorial rhetoric. Analyzing and denouncing the internal mechanisms of such rhetoric is one of the most urgent tasks of semiotics.

9. Unveiling conspiracy.

Umberto Eco, one of the fathers of contemporary semiotics and one of the greatest semioticians of all times, has often dealt with the topic of conspiracy theories. Many of his novels, not to say all of his novels, revolve around this thematic kernel. In certain cases, conspiracy theories constitute the entire plot of the novel, like in *Foucault's Pendulum* (1988), arguably, the best piece of fiction ever written on conspiracy theories, their internal dynamics, and social absurdities. Umberto Eco is also renown as one of the fiercest critics of Dan Brown.

Apparently, indeed, the two authors' works resemble: they both draw on historical and cultural erudition in order to design intricate investigative plots. In reality, Eco's and Brown's approaches to mystery and conspiracy could not be more different. Eco narratively represents conspiracy theories so as to ridicule them, and encourage his readers to discard them as mere nonsense. Dan Brown, on the contrary, does not satirize conspiracy theories but fuel them, promoting their wider circulation in society and, what is even more disquieting, enhancing their epistemic status. Cooperative readers of Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum* are prompted to laugh at conspiracy theories; followers of Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* are titillated into believing them and spreading their contagion^{iv}. That is the main reason why Eco has constantly criticized Brown. His critique bears a moral message that is visible not only in Eco's novels but resonates, under a different guise, from his foundational theoretical work. If one had to summarize the core of Umberto Eco's philosophical inquiry into one sentence, or slogan, it would be reasonable to argue that most of his work has been devoted to investigate the limits of interpretation (1990). This inquiry entails two dimensions: on the one hand, a theoretical line: showing that signs, texts, discourse, and culture in general are not always open to the proliferation of meaning, but produce signification in ways that are regulated by societies through established patterns. These codes of interpretation can be continuously negotiated and renegotiated, but nevertheless hold a central place in the processes through which meaning is created, shared, and circulated in societies. The second dimension, a moral one, intertwines with the first. Patterns of interpretation do not only exist; they must also hold for social communication to be possible. A society that does not share any codes, and does not impose any limits to interpretation, is a disintegrating society, where human beings are progressively deprived of what defines and enables them as social and political animals, that is, language.

Eco's theoretical stance and even more the hermeneutical ethics resulting from it have sometimes been labeled as conservative, or even reactionary. Nothing could be more wrong. Eco has been an outspoken critic, for instance, of the textual hermeneutics of religious fundamentalisms, especially when, adopting literalism, they claim that one, and only one interpretation of a sacred text is possible (Eco 1992). This interpretive attitude only apparently sets rigid limits for the way in which a text, considered as directly emanating from transcendence, can be used for the production and circulation of further meaning (Leone 2012 *The Semiotics*). In reality, denying that alternative interpretations of a text are possible is equally irrational, from Eco's perspective, as affirming that any interpretation of a text is possible. The first claim rejects the idea that a multiplicity of cultural patterns encoding and

decoding social meaning might exist; the second admits this multiplicity but see no rational, inter-subjective ways to choose among them, or at least to rank them (Leone Forthcoming *On Depth*). Most of Eco's theoretical work, as well as its fictional counterpart, can be seen as a sophisticated, monumental attempt to conceptually dismantle these positions while showing their burden of heavy moral consequences.

How would societies in which these two hermeneutic lines predominate look like? A human group dominated by a fundamentalist interpretive ethics would most probably be a repressive one (Leone 2014 *Sémiotique*). Unfortunately, this scenario is not only fictional, but has received many embodiments through history. It is at work even in many contemporary societies. Wherever a sacred text, or a corpus of sacred texts, is institutionally held as the intangible pillar of society, an interpretive bureaucracy develops in order to link power and its control over individuals. Idiosyncrasies that do not align with the enthroned pattern are discarded, repressed, persecuted. Ways of life that do not conform with the rule, considered as straightforwardly descending from transcendence with no human mediation, are outlawed, banned, their bearers forcibly converted or exterminated. A society that adopts a fundamentalist interpretive hermeneutics is one that frustrates the innate human propensity for creativity and construction of infinite alternatives.

However, Eco's work points out with equal if not greater vehemence the risks resulting from a hermeneutical ethics that does not recognize any legitimate method for ranking interpretations. According to this view, not only sacred texts, but also legal codes, not to speak of fictional narratives, are open to any kind of interpretation, with no boundaries being able to set a limit, or at least a range of limits, to such proliferation. As it is known, Eco has identified in a certain interpretation of Derrida's deconstructionism, and mainly in the US, politicized version of it, the main source of such hermeneutic style (Eco 1992). Nietzsche can be considered as its first modern advocate: only interpretations exist, not facts. One might wonder how a society, wherein this perspective predominates, would look like. It would not be a repressive society in the same way as a fundamentalist society would be. No entrenched interpretive pattern would designate insiders and outsiders, rulers and outcasts. On the contrary, one might have the impression that, in a deconstructive society, anything might go, from sexual behaviors to literary taste, from legal interpretations to scientific findings. In this domain, nevertheless, Ronald Dworkin seems to join Eco in expressing a preoccupation about the heavy consequences that such deconstructive utopia might bear on the order of society (Dworkin 1982). A hermeneutics without limits, indeed, would be unable to handle interpretive conflicts. Just imagine, with Dworkin, a judge that, while condemning a convicted

to life sentence, would affirm that such sentence results from an interpretation of facts, but that other interpretations are possible. Or imagine a doctor prescribing a cycle of chemotherapy by adopting the same hermeneutic stance. Legal or medical victims of such interpretive attitude would be horrified, asking for juridical or medical redress.

The example indicates that a society in which interpretations are never prioritized is neither a powerless society, nor one in which repression of the weaker magically disappears. On the contrary, it is a model of society in which repression and violence proliferate without a center, depending on irrational contagion (Leone Forthcoming *Semiótica*). From a certain point of view, whereas fundamentalist power is relatively easy to detect and contrast, deconstructive power is not, since it is not managed by a specific bureaucracy. Power unbalance and injustice pop out randomly, according to patterns that are difficult to map since they do not respond to a public agenda, but to private, unstructured biases, which are nevertheless easy prey of manipulation. Eventually, the most powerful agencies triumph in deconstructive societies as well in fundamentalist ones, but they do so more surreptitiously, without an army.

One of the great contributions of Umberto Eco to discussion on this theme consisted in showing that both hermeneutical attitudes could be discarded not only in view of their essentially anti-democratic political consequences (despotic repression / anarchist repression), but also in theoretical, and therefore objective, terms. Charles S. Peirce's model of semiosis as interpreted by Eco offers the conceptual ground for promoting a society in which limits are neither imposed nor deconstructed, but rationally and inter-subjectively negotiated (Eco 1976).

Peirce's modeling of signification and meaning gives credit to two quintessential features of human cognition. On the one hand, as it was pointed out on several occasions, human beings are innately inclined to meaning proliferation (Leone 2011 *Potentiality*). The diagram through which Peirce sought to capture this tendency is an open one. It is open to infinity: each sign points to a further sign, and so on and so forth without possible halt. On the other hand, humans equally strive for stability: they crystallize semiosis into habits that guide human cognitions, emotions, and actions. The problem of the two interpretive lines exposed above is that they miss the dialectic between these two equally essential cognitive features and endorse only one of them. In fundamentalist hermeneutics, only one habit is selected as dominant. Semiosis is locked into a rigidly codified interpretant that is imagined as totally conforming with the inner structure of a sacred text. Any attempt at reactivating the engine of semiosis by introducing alternative interpretants is quashed though often violent hermeneutical bureaucracy. Human beings that live under the rule of a single, canonized set of

habits experience deep alienation. They are pushed to turn into machines, to which no alternatives are conceivable (Leone 2012 *Breve*). However, also the deconstructionist society misses the dialectic between semiosis and habits, although in this case only the former is emphasized, while the latter is discarded. For the political deconstructionist, any habit is a foe to be rejected through the exercise of further semiosis. The beautiful creativity that humans express in contemporary poetry incarnates the utopia of a self-ruled society, in which continuously proliferating differences magically compose into multifarious, iridescent harmony. This ethical and political stance, though, while praiseworthily reacting to conservatism and autocratic repression, neglects that poetry too has its rules and codes, and that humans tend to rank their poets as well as they rank their legal principles or economic recipes. But the worse consequence of adopting a deconstructive hermeneutic is not so much literary anarchy — which some could even find amusing — as cognitive instability. A life with no habits is an unbearable chaos. A society with no interpretive patterns is one where conflict is likely to emerge at every step, and at every step is likely to stay unresolved.

Between a hermeneutic model that imposes a habit and thwarts any semiosis and a hermeneutic model that imposes semiosis and thwarts any habit, Eco's semiotics promises a third way: developing a method that is able to dissect interpretations and rank their qualities. From this point of view, interpretive semiotics meets the philosophical needs of anti-Nietzschean new realism since it provides its philosophical claim with a methodology. According to new realism, it is not true, as Nietzsche and his deconstructive interpreters would claim, that facts do not exist, and that only interpretations rule. The new realist philosopher stresses the relevance of reality, and therefore of facts, in guiding the moves of social life (Ferraris 2012). The interpretive semiotician is not primarily concerned with facts, since per definition and disciplinary tradition semiotics focuses on semiosis, not on the ontology supposedly behind it (Eco 1997). However, truthful interpretations are the facts of semiotics. The reality that new realist philosophers call for is nothing else, from the semiotic point of view, than the network of interpretive habits that a community inter-subjectively and rationally accepts as guiding patterns at a certain stage of its historical and cultural evolution. One could even claim that the advantage of Eco's semiotics over new realist philosophy is that the former better than the latter escapes any temptation of embracing a fundamentalist model as ruling habit. That is the case because what new realist philosophers call "reality" is, for semioticians, a particularly established pattern of interpretation. Semiotics therefore does not indiscriminately reject Nietzsche's affirmation, but qualifies it by insisting that interpretations can be ranked, and that, as Peirce first intuited, ranking of interpretations is

what results into a feeling of reality. Two major issues are therefore at stake. First: what is the position of conspiracy theories and their supporters in relation to the different hermeneutical attitudes exposed thus far; second, what is the specific contribution of semiotics in countering the risks of founding a society on the idea of conspiracy.

The remarkable success of conspiracy theory in present-day societies cannot be explained in relation to socio-political and economic reasons only. A feature of conspiracy theories that has frequently been overlooked is that they are able to give a certain aesthetic pleasure. Similarly to gossip or metropolitan legends, conspiracy theories also thrive on boredom. Those who receive formulations of these theories are snapped from the calm rationality of the mainstream media discourse and instantaneously transported into a new scenario, which resembles a crime novel or a spy movie. Confronted with a new conspiracy theory, the audience is led to embrace the belief that nothing is how it seems. There is always a deeper truth to be discovered under the surface of history. The aesthetic pleasure of this belief derives from a sort of micro-empowerment. Psychologists know very well that the success of secrets, and the paradoxical impossibility of keeping them that results from it, stems from the pleasure that people feel when they are communicated something that is not of public domain. From gossip among friends to scoop magazines, such pleasure ultimately derives from the illusory idea of an inclusion, which also entails a corresponding exclusion. The communication of a secret immediately determines a separation between insiders and outsiders, between those who know about what really is going on and those who, on the contrary, keep living in blissed ignorance of reality (Quill 2014). A corollary of this mechanism is that conspiracy theories, in order to be effective, must not be communicated through mainstream channels. They work insofar as those who receive and absorb them can cultivate the illusion that only they, and a small number of other adepts, are depositary of the truth.

Most conspiracy theories, such as those claiming that there is a global lobby trying to enslave the human kind through chemicals released by planes (chemtrails conspiracy theory) are so unsupported by any scientific evidence that they are often easily ridiculed by the mainstream scientific and media discourse. However, such derision actually empowers conspiracy theories instead of denigrating them. For supporters of these theories, indeed, being ridiculed by the 'ignorant mass' is further proof of belonging to an illuminated elite, to the group of the few who really know where the truth lies. The aesthetic pleasure at the core of conspiracy theories is therefore that of a diversion from mainstream thought, which creates ipso facto a community of saved ones, entrusted with the mission of communicating truth to those

enslaved by power and living in ignorance. This aesthetic effect is the result of a semiotic mechanism. Abstractedly speaking, it can be described as a particular version of deconstructive hermeneutics. As the hermeneutics of deconstruction rejects any interpretive habit, claims that every habit is an imposition of power, and operates for its dismantlement, so conspiracy theories insinuate that mainstream social and political beliefs are nothing but poisonous habits that powerful lobbies instill in citizens. Moreover, as deconstruction, so conspiracy thought aims at the reactivation of semiosis, mainly through denigration of mainstream truths as public lies.

Nevertheless, one should underline, to the credit of deconstructionism, that an importance nuance differentiates this theoretical frame from the usual enfolding of conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories are never poetic. They do not claim that every habit can be shattered through the continuous reactivation of unlimited semiosis, as Derrida's poetics typically would suggest (Derrida 1967). On the opposite, conspiracy theories more trivially replace a mainstream habit, supported by the scientific and socio-political community, with a minority habit, which titillates the minority's feeling of exclusivity. At the same time, conspiracy theories borrow from deconstruction the idea that any counter-argument can be dismantled by a further declination of the conspiracy theory itself, following a cyclical pattern.

In conclusion, the answer to the first question above (what is the main hermeneutical attitude of conspiracy theorists?) is that conspiracy theories embrace a trivialized deconstructive attitude toward interpretive habits. They deconstruct mainstream beliefs, but only in order to merely replace them with cliquish alternative visions. Before dealing with the second issue, that is, the role of semiotics vis-à-vis conspiracy theories, the question should be raised of the reasons for which the aesthetic thrill attached to such alternative social thought is not equally distributed throughout history, but emerges with increased salience in certain specific social and cultural contexts. In other words: if secrets, rumors, and conspiracy ideas intrinsically give aesthetic pleasure, since they empower through the feeling of belonging to a privileged minority of saved ones, why do conspiracy theories thrive only in certain periods of history? Answering this question is tantamount to formulating hypotheses explaining the success of deconstructive attitudes in history. Several orders of explanations are possible. Societal fragmentation is definitely an important element. The more the members of a society perceive themselves as isolated individuals, belonging to no socio-cultural group in particular, adhering to no political organization, and deprived of any strong interpretive habits, the more they will be prey to conspiracy theorists who designate them as their new constituency, as members of an enlightened minority that must struggle to endure the ignorant subjugation of

mainstream thought. In the present-day European context, for instance, where the last decade has seen an inexorable decline of the framing power of traditional political formations such as parties or unions, new leaders were easily able to emerge and shape their constituency through the creation or circulation of conspiracy theories. In certain cases, the designation of a culprit enhances the individuation potential of these theories, since they federate a group against a narrative foe, as it was pointed out earlier. However, a key element of success of contemporary conspiracy theories, which somehow sets them apart from their modern and pre-modern version, is that they do not need a culprit anymore. One could rather claim that the real culprit of present-day conspiracy theorists is majority itself, the mainstream, and all the habits that crystallize a consensus in society.

Semiotics is not a political tool. Semioticians are not supposed to engage in favor or against cultural and social attitudes. However, semioticians who analyze their societies cannot close their eyes either. On the contrary, they must put their methodology at the service of public awareness. At the moment, such public awareness also includes the role of conspiracy theories in the development of society. What kind of society is one in which conspiracy theories proliferate and their creators thrive, accumulating symbolical and political leadership? The consequences of the prevalence of a deconstructive hermeneutics in society has already been pointed out: a collectivity that does not provide itself with inter-subjective, rational patterns for the consolidation of interpretive habits is inevitably a chaotic society, one in which conflicts constantly arise and are never recomposed.

As it was underlined earlier, though, conspiracy thought and deconstruction are not the same. The former is a grotesque version of the latter, leading to a sort of demagogic despotism. A society dominated by conspiracy theories, indeed, is not only a conflictive society, where mainstream thought is continuously threatened by conspiracy alternatives. More dangerously, a conspiracy society is one in which the questioning power of deconstruction is systematically defused. Indeed, a society in which mainstream thought is never challenged by any alternative visions, which dismantle interpretive habits and reactivate semiosis, is an essentially despotic one. Critics, and semioticians among them, have a duty to challenge mainstream thought and beliefs. When that does not happen, society dangerously drifts toward fundamentalist hermeneutics. However, the problem of most popular conspiracy theories is that they challenge mainstream thought by imposing new interpretive habits whose construction, though, is supposed to never lead to a mainstream constituency. In other words, conspiracy theories are alternative versions of reality whose purpose is not that of introducing a new shared interpretive habit, but to have a conspiracy theory parasitically

thrive on the back of mainstream thought. Conspiracy theorists do not want to supplant mainstream opinion leaders, for this replacement would eliminate the key element of their force, which is the capacity of titillating the public opinion with the prospect of secrecy. The first potential danger of conspiracy theories is therefore the tendency to disempower any sort of alternative vision of reality. Conspiracy theories apparently introduce more free thinking in society, but in reality they do so by rejecting a common communicative, inter-subjective, and rational framework, entrenching themselves in a position of self-indulgent minority. They therefore actually contribute to the unshakable nature of mainstream versions of realities. For instance, it is very probable that the CIA resorted to unconventional, debatable, and sometimes illegal methods of action throughout history; however, conspiracy theories that target the CIA do not actually threaten its operative grasp; on the contrary, they contribute to its unquestionable status. The worst consequence that stems from this attitude is that culprits of conspiracy theories cannot be rationally defended, since they are accused by arguments that typically escape any rational scrutiny. That is particularly worrisome when culprits are not identified in the powerful agencies of society (the government, the secret services, the police), but in quantitative or qualitative minorities (the Jews, the Arabs, the migrants). Hence, the issue of determining the role and effect of conspiracy theories in society comes down to the need of differentiating between critical and conspiracy theories, between deconstructive and conspiracy hermeneutics. Nevertheless, such distinction cannot be made in terms of contents. It must be made in terms of argumentative patterns. Conspiracy theories, that is, do not show their nature in what they say, but in how they say it, in the specific rhetoric that they adopt in order to communicate an aura of secrecy, create a symbolical elite, and reproduce the separation between insiders and outsiders, which is instrumental to the parasitic existence of conspiracy leaders themselves. Here lies the main role of semiotics: singling out the rhetorical and argumentative lines through which conspiracy theories are created and maintained in the social imaginaire.

10. The end of semiotics.

The title of this concluding section has two contradictory meanings, like many responses of ancient divination. On the one hand, the end of semiotics designates its termination. Semiotics as a discipline will end, despite having been one of the main sources and phenomena of revitalization of humanities in the contemporary epoch, if semiotics will not be able to refocus

its self-awareness and activities. But this is not the worst scenario. What is worse is that the end of semiotics imperils the whole anthropological attitude that semiotics is about and turns into an academic endeavor. As this long essay has tried to demonstrate, at the core of semiotics lies the idea that human beings are gifted with alternatives, and these alternatives translate into an extraordinary variety of hermeneutics. The dream of thwarting the never-ending, exuberant flourishing of semiosis is, it has been underlined several times, a dictatorial utopia, be it carried on in the name of a sacred text or under the banner of political ideology. At the same time, against the lures of contemporary divination, semiotics equally rests on the conviction that human beings are also endowed with a rational talent for organizing meaning in society. Interpretations are not only individually crafted; they are also communicated. But what is communication without community? Without the idea that the members of a society voluntarily deprive themselves of some of their hermeneutic immunity in order to enable the circulation of a gift (in Latin, "*munus*"), and determine the conditions in which meaning can arise under the guise of a habit (Esposito 1998)? No man is an island, and no language is individual. Semiotics bets on the human capability for ranking and arranging interpretations, in the reading of a sacred text as in that of a political constitution.

The intrinsic poetry of a fugue of interpretants, freely stemming from semiosis in the awestruck perception of nature, in the contemplation of the arts, in challenging the mask that each individual offers to social intercourse; at the same time, the crystalline beauty of a langue that grows like a sumptuous temple of marble, where each parole gives a fragment of contribution but disappears, befuddled, in the majestic movement of the semiosphere; liberty and necessity, the invention of symbols, the fluctuation of icons, the cogency of indexes: terminating semiotics as a human way to cognition and as a science studying it means yielding to an ideology that frustrates either of these two aspects: the capriciousness of meaning; its discipline.

However, "the end of semiotics" also bears another meaning. It designates not the death of a field of knowledge but its ultimate goal. Given the terms in which semiotics has been understood in this essay, its intrinsic finality must be that of a double debunking. On the one hand, resisting those who claim that interpreting is not the quintessential operation of humanity. Neo-positivists, fundamentalists, and to a certain extent also reductionists and new realists all spouse, in different ways, the same crusade: defeating the interpreter; unmasking the travesty of all hermeneutics; persuading that the words of humanity repose in a granitic terra firma, be it the pseudo-determinations of neurophysiology or the letter of a sacred text. This first debunking will aim at proving, not only through evocation but through actual

demonstration, that a different way of meaning is always possible, and that the door of semiosis is always open.

On the other hand, resisting all those who, among skeptics, conspirators, and new haruspices, mud the waters of meaning, claiming that no way exists to distinguish between what is caused and what is not, between the arbitrariness of a symbol and the binding suggestion of an index. The difficult task ahead is made more difficult in times of social disintegration, when even the word of a friend doesn't count anymore and people see ghosts everywhere. In these terrible times, the semiotician will give a new voice to the wind of rationality that blows through the Western world at least from the Greeks, and that blew through other winds in other parts of the world. This voice will say: there is infinity in interpretation, but there is also interpretation in infinity. Habits can be continuously negotiated and renegotiated, but this never-ending struggle is not a hoax, since the innate human longing for companionship prompts it. Being together is sharing meaning.

And this is how, from now on, semioticians will introduce themselves in parties: "I am a double debunker; I show people that meaning is infinite, and I show them how to cope with it".

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ⁱ Literature on the early history of semiotics is extensive. For an introduction, Dutz and Schmitter 1985; Manetti 1987; Manetti 2013.

ⁱⁱ Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 35.15. Literature on this foundational myth is extensive. See Schmidt-Linsenhoff 1996; Stoichita 1997, Suthor 1999, Wolf 1999.

ⁱⁱⁱ Born May 11, 1947.

^{iv} For an in-depth and sophisticated comparison between the two authors, Cobley 2007.